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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 004555

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TAGS: [PA](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [IO](#)

SUBJECT: JORDANIAN PRESS: WHEN IN A PICKLE, PRAISE THE KING
AND BASH THE U.S.

Classified By: Ambassador Gnehm for reason 1.5 (b) (d)

1. (C) Summary. Given the anti-American sentiment on the street and the recent events of Abu Ghreib prison and the violence in Rafah, the Jordanian news media have not missed an opportunity over the past month to attack not only U.S. policy, but American institutions and society in general. The volume and intensity of this strident anti-Americanism in the government-dominated media contrasts with the close strategic and economic ties between Jordan's leadership and the USG. Opinion polls already show an overwhelmingly negative impression of America's role in the region regarding issues such as Palestine and Iraq. The GOJ's apparent acquiescence in the negative press on the U.S., especially given the King's frequent trips to Washington and the high-profile U.S. development assistance and Jordanian-US cooperation in Iraq, seems only to pour oil on the flames. End Summary.

America: The Bad, the Ugly, and the Even Uglier

2. (C) The perceived U.S. failure to curb Israeli violence against the Palestinians or America's purported designs against Iraqi oil and sovereignty have long been staples of the negative picture presented by Jordan's major Arabic dailies. But increasingly, columnists and editorialists are attributing these allegedly anti-Arab policies to American history, culture and religious extremism. A growing number of media commentators link what they describe as the American plot to impose hegemony over a fragmented Arab world with what they call the genocide against Native Americans, slavery and racism, and the perceived violence of American culture. Springing out of this fertile ground, according to the self-styled analysts of American history, is the Zionist-inspired stereotyping of Islam and Muslims.

Don't Argue with Popular Passions

3. (C) Almost completely lacking is any effort to balance this picture of an American nemesis. One of our contacts, the head of a prestigious social research institute, claimed that he spoke out on this issue to a gathering of local journalists. "The U.S. (in response to Abu Ghreib abuses) just put its top brass on trial. Their Generals were getting their stars melted down, but you (the Jordanian journalists) said nothing about this," he told his colleagues. Our contact quoted a member of an oversight group at Jordan TV as complaining over the lack of critical discussion of local issues in a televised mock parliament made up of university students. "I'm more anti-Israel and anti-US than any of you," she said. "But is there nothing else to talk about except Zionism and Imperialism?"

A Free and Outspoken Media -- When it Comes to the U.S. and Israel

4. (C) Post has noticed a correlation between the pitch and placement of Anti-American rhetoric in the press and the presence or absence of reporting on domestic scandals, which occasionally do make it into the local press. Recent articles and editorials about the alleged corruption of former Prime Minister Abu Ragheb, generated by allegations against him among members of the reconstituted Jordanian parliament, for example, abruptly disappeared, unresolved, after a week. They were replaced by above-the-fold sensationalism about the latest US "outrages" in Iraq. The bulk of press reporting on Iraq consists of wire service reports and photos, with locally written -- and usually highly negative -- headlines and subheads. Photo selection also reflects an inclination towards highlighting chaos and civilian carnage.

When in Doubt, Just Praise the King

5. (C) Meanwhile, coverage of the King and Queen has reached new heights of fawning overkill, with an above-the-fold space reserved daily for the King, frequent multi-page spreads of paid congratulatory ads and occasional supplements for special occasions, displaying the King and Queen in heroic poses, such as the recent Independence Day celebration, or the King's birthday. Naturally, any pronouncement, meeting or travel by the monarch is ipso facto the lead story in all

media. We are told by straightfaced GOJ officials close to the court that "His Majesty really doesn't like this sort of thing and has asked the press to tone it down." One Palace contact told us following the King's May visit to Washington that he hoped the King's real accomplishments would not be lost in the hyperbolic press coverage, inspired by the Palace's own media advisors. The publishers, according to these contacts, find the Royal Supplements a good way to persuade the private sector to take out expensive advertisements. Media contacts also report a requirement imposed by the Royal Court that the media (print and broadcast) run its press releases or announcements verbatim. One journalist told us that he was suspended from his paper for refusing to write enough stories about the King. The wall-to-wall, servile praise of King and family in the press is unparalleled here, in the view of long-time Jordan-watchers at post --unparalleled in its extent and in its discord from public opinion.

Just Who Are the Gatekeepers?

16. (C) Our contacts in the media assure us that the Government owns a controlling interest in at least one of the three Arabic dailies and that it exercises strong influence through advertising revenues. Moreover, the General Intelligence Division (GID) is widely alleged by our journalist contacts to exercise control over local journalists, especially when they cover domestic issues. We are told, for example, that there is a special GID division which monitors the press, and that a number of columnists and commentators make no secret of faxing their articles to GID officers for prior approval, or of writing articles based on instructions from the GID. If true, this would reflect the concern with which the security services continue to view the media, a historic battleground of inter-Arab and ideological rivalry, and a potential shaper of -- or brake on -- passions in the street. It is inconceivable that the editorial staff determines the overall slant of the news or the tone of the commentary over the long haul without a lively appreciation of the regime's red lines. The publisher of a weekly that sometimes features exposes of second-tier Ministers and other officials and has adopted a violently anti-American tone in the past was recently jailed on charges of blackening Jordan's image and threatening its relations with a "friendly state" (Saudi Arabia) at a time when the GOJ was negotiating an extension to a vital oil concession. The journalist later "voluntarily" suspended his paper and agreed to write a new article in praise of Saudi-Jordanian relations.

The Official Paradox: Both Sides of the Mouth

17. (C) Given the control that the GOJ exercises over the media when it wishes, why does Jordan's leadership tolerate such an unbalanced and unrelenting distortion of U.S. goals in the region and of American society and history? The King's strong links to the U.S. are well known, and an INR poll last fall showed that most Jordanians, although they strongly reject U.S. policy, believe that their country, down to the ordinary citizen, benefits from that relationship. One explanation for the media's stance is that the GOJ hopes to provide in the media a "safety valve" for the passions of the street. The other motive may be to divert popular frustration with political oppression and economic pressure. A third motive may be to balance the scales a bit against its strong association with unpopular U.S. policies --although rapid attacks against U.S. policy in the long run must reinforce negative public views of Jordan's reliance on the U.S.

18. (C) As one media analyst recently put it to the IO, "the security services are concerned first and foremost with the regime's survival. They know there is anger in the street aimed at the government -- price hikes, the King's frequent travel and apparent high living -- and therefore see it as necessary to channel popular anger in the only acceptable direction, at the U.S. and Israel. And they don't have to work hard given the very real anger out there about Iraq and Palestine. It's more an issue of letting it go and not getting in the way." The IO commented that that sounded like a dangerous game. After all, the relationship with the U.S. is also vital to the regime. Evoking public passions against the U.S. could make it difficult over the long run for the government to maintain the close level of cooperation on issues like Iraqi or Israel that it has shown in the past. But the contact replied that the security services saw no other path. He maintained that the tenor of local coverage of the King's "triumph" in gaining assurances (papers used the verb "snatched") from President Bush regarding the final settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was part of the same tactic.

Needed: Press Freedom --The Real Thing

19. (C) It would be against American ideals and interests (as well as counterproductive) to urge the GOJ to stifle editorial opinion against the U.S. The USG cannot attempt to

direct editorial policies while maintaining that reform, including press freedom, must come from within the Arab world. We should not, however, ignore distortions or inaccuracies or the absence of any countervailing voice in the Jordanian news media. The Post works hard to rebut individual cases of misrepresentation with newspaper editors and individual journalists, and our efforts often result in corrections and even follow-up stories reflecting the Embassy's complaints. But these are insufficient to stem the volume of distorted and pejorative coverage of the U.S. and the long-term poisoning of popular emotions.

10. (C) We should make Jordanian journalist and media owners and managers aware of how truly virulent anti-U.S. articles affect the image of Jordan and the Arabs among Americans who follow their media. One of our contacts recalled the astonishment of a senior columnist known for his anti-U.S. diatribes, who was on a recent visit to the U.S. and encountered several Arabic-speaking USG officials and scholars who had read his attacks on U.S. society and culture. He was astonished by their interest. "That toned him down for quite a while," our contact said. In our opinion, it would be useful to arrange a series of dialogues between Jordanian and other Arab journalists and informed US counterparts who could compare and contrast mutual news coverage and its impact on popular perceptions and political trends in both societies.

11. (C) Finally, if America-bashing is indeed tolerated by the regime to divert their public from their own failings, we need to encourage more -- not less -- press freedom, ensuring that journalists are free to examine local issues. We should encourage freedom to report honestly and without inhibition on issues that affect daily life, including corruption, nepotism, the lack of jobs or political participation and other issues that affect the ordinary citizen. Solid investigative reporting on these issues, we suspect, would prove much more riveting than rehashed attacks on U.S. policy and might even result in a cooler, more balanced treatment of the U.S. role. The conversation about press freedom would need to happen at the highest levels.

GNEHM